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2

AURELIO

DIVISION AGENT AURELIO DIAZ PICKED UP THE LONE civilian coming into the Dark Zone just after noon. He was on a rooftop overlooking Fifty-eighth Street and Fifth Avenue, across from the memorial to William Tecumseh Sherman. He stopped there every day on his normal patrol, if emergent duties didn't take him to other parts of the city. It was low enough to let him get to the street fast if he needed to, but high enough to give him a view of the barricades keeping people out of the Dark Zone.

The woman vaulted the barricades and paused just inside, taking in her surroundings. Diaz's first instinct was to run her face through ISAC's facial-recognition database, using the specialized gear all Division agents wore: advanced contact lenses to capture her image, the SHD smartwatch to sync the images from the contact

and turn them into a three-dimensional projection, and the so-called ISAC brick, a communications relay device attached to Diaz's backpack. The brick connected Diaz—and all other Division agents—to ISAC, a proprietary artificial intelligence network.

The problem was, she was moving at an angle away from him so he couldn't get a good capture of her face. Either way, she made him curious. Division agents were supposed to enter and exit through the checkpoints spaced around the zone's perimeter, which ran from the southwest corner of Central Park down Broadway to Twenty-third Street, then around and back up past Grand Central Station all the way to Sixty-fifth Street. In theory nobody else was supposed to go in or out under any circumstances. The zone had been one of the first quarantined spaces in the city when the Green Poison had struck, and the overwhelmed Joint Task Force had walled it off and tried to save the rest of the city.

Now, five months after the outbreak, the Dark Zone was quieter than it had been, but still no place for a lone civilian. Often it was no place for a lone Division agent. Other parts of New York were almost livable, but the Dark Zone was completely lawless. Not just lawless—it seemed to attract the most deranged and dangerous people in the city. They were particularly congregated in the northern end of the DZ, because the Division and JTF work in the city spread south to north. Some of the southern DZ neighborhoods were almost normal again, but up here it was still a war zone. Worse than a war zone, in fact. More like a mass psychotic break, where

each individual psycho was heavily armed. Not to mention the omnipresent threat of lingering virus that could start a new wave of lethal infections.

And here was a lone woman jumping a barricade to get in. Diaz watched her head east on Sixtieth. She was calm, purposeful. She knew where she was going—or at least wanted watchers to think she did.

He dropped down to street level and followed her. *Entering the Dark Zone*, ISAC's AI said. Yeah, Diaz thought, I know. The only other people on the street were wandering scavengers.

Earlier that morning, Diaz had figured he would run his patrol and then talk to the JTF command down at the Post Office base of operations about whether they still needed him here. He could have left anytime he wanted to, of course. Division agents were empowered by Presidential Directive 51 to act with more or less unlimited discretion. They had no rules of engagement, and answered to no authority within the military chain of command. They were recruited and trained in secret, and activated only in times of critical emergency, when the American government, and social order, was in danger of collapse. Before the Dollar Flu, Diaz had been a gym teacher in DC, with two kids and a wife who worked at a bank.

All of that had changed on Black Friday, when some nutcase had unleashed a weaponized smallpox on the world, starting right here in New York City. Within weeks it had spread all over the world . . . and Diaz's wife, Graciela, was dead. Maybe she had touched one of the

twenty-dollar bills first infected with the virus—thus the nicknames Green Poison, Dollar Bug, et cetera—or maybe she'd caught it from someone who had. In the end, it didn't matter. She had died along with millions of others.

Now, five months later, order wasn't exactly restored in New York, but spring had brought new hope. Pretty soon, Diaz figured he would be able to leave New York and head back home. His kids were there. Mobilized in DC, he'd come up to New York after the first wave of Division agents were killed or went rogue in the violent chaos after the outbreak. At that time, New York had needed help and things in DC had seemed relatively stable by comparison. He wasn't sure that was the case anymore . . . and either way, he'd been away from Ivan and Amelia for too long. The JTF was supposed to be caring for them, but Diaz wanted to be certain.

Getting back to DC was still his plan, but before he could check in at the JTF safe house down on Forty-fifth and Broadway and exit the Dark Zone, he had to see where this woman was going and why. He couldn't just leave her to wander around on her own.

She stayed on Sixtieth to Madison, then turned south. Fires had raged along this part of Madison, and it was mostly abandoned. Fifth and Park were different. Entrenched bands of raiders and bandits had carved out territories along the entire stretch of those avenues between Fifty-second and Sixtieth or so. The boundaries fluctuated.

Trailing her, Diaz was suddenly sure she was choosing

her route to avoid that dangerous stretch of Fifth and Park Avenues. She knew this part of the Dark Zone. That made him real curious. He was also curious about the Benelli Super 90 shotgun slung over her right shoulder, next to a pack that sure looked like Division issue . . . just like the Super 90 was a standard room-sweeper that some agents preferred. But she didn't have a watch, and there was no brick on her pack. She wasn't an agent. So who was she?

She cut back west on Fifty-fifth, and Diaz's alarm bells went off. At the corner of Fifth and Fifty-fifth, the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church was home to a gang of apocalyptic cultists. They would be on her like a school of piranha if she went that far. He stepped up his pace, closing to within a hundred feet of her before she noticed and looked over her shoulder. Pretty good situational awareness, he thought. He saw her clock his Division gear and mentally categorize him as no threat. Interesting. That meant she knew she wasn't doing anything she thought would bring her into conflict with a Division agent.

Even so, she was still walking straight toward the church cult.

Diaz cut up Madison at a run, and then headed west on Fifty-sixth to get ahead of her. He scrambled through the ruins of a restaurant that had burned in the aftermath of the plague. Behind it was a narrow alley that ran between the church and the looming skyscraper just to the north. He hopped the fence and came around to the front of the church.

A fresh body dangled from the gallows in the church

courtyard. Diaz filed it away. He, or another Division agent, would have to do something about the cult. But today he had another mission. The heavy wooden doors facing Fifth Avenue opened and a group of the cultists saw him. He stayed facing them, his G36 aimed low, generally in their direction but not targeting any one of them specifically. “Stay cool,” he said.

They looked past him and saw the woman. She saw them, too—and she saw Aurelio.

Her response intrigued him even more. She cut across the street to give herself some room, but she didn’t panic, didn’t run. She was no average civilian, that much Aurelio could tell. She passed down the block, staying on Fifty-fifth toward Sixth Avenue. Aurelio backed toward the street. The cultists came out onto the church steps, their eyes boring into him. He’d seen that look before. They wanted him on their gallows, too. Pulling the trigger on the G36 would solve a lot of problems, he thought . . . but until they made a hostile move, he couldn’t justify it. Per Directive 51, he could have mowed the whole group down and nobody would ever have said anything, but that wasn’t what Aurelio Diaz—or the Strategic Homeland Division, commonly shortened to SHD—believed in. He backed into the courtyard gate, opened it, and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

“You stayed cool,” he said, and kept walking. None of them followed him. When he got to the corner he saw the woman at the far end of the block, almost to Sixth. She turned north, surprising him. She was definitely taking the long way to wherever she was going, and although it

made sense for her to avoid Fifth Avenue, clearly her intel about the area wasn't complete or she wouldn't have gone anywhere near the church.

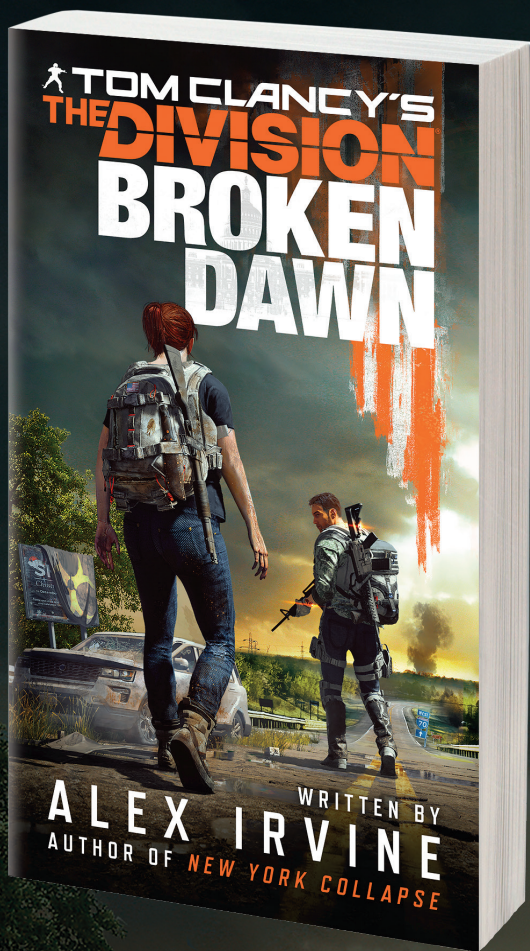
So where was she going?

Fifty-eighth Street, as it turned out. When she got there, she stood for a long moment looking at a nondescript open storefront on the north side of the street next to a parking garage. A shredded awning flapped over the storefront. The inside looked like it might have been under construction. He couldn't see much.

The woman crossed the street and went inside. Interesting, Diaz thought. There was nothing he knew of in that building. Nothing in the garage would be of interest. Over the old store were a few floors of ordinary windows. He thought he saw light in one of them, but couldn't tell whether it was just reflected through a different window from one of the skyscrapers on the same block.

Diaz decided to stay where he was for a few minutes, see what happened. He'd developed a pretty good sense for when people were up to no good—you didn't survive in this ravaged New York without one—and he wasn't getting that sense from her. Still, she'd walked a good mile or more after entering the Dark Zone within five hundred yards of her target location. That piqued his curiosity.

If she came out soon, he would stay on her trail until he left the Dark Zone. Partly that was just because he thought she might need an escort, but also he was curious. Usually people tried to get out of the Dark Zone, not in. What was she up to?



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